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Milking the Information: Resources on Herbal Lactation Aids

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ABSTRACT

This article provides information for the layperson on herbs commonly used as galactagogues (lactation aids), their effectiveness, and risks according to existing scientific literature. In addition, resources for further research on herbal lactation aids are listed.

Keywords: galactagogue, lactation aid, herbal supplement

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Barnes (2008, 4) found that approximately 38 percent of adults have used some form of complementary and alternative medicine, with herbal supplements making up the bulk of that usage (Clarke et al. 2015, 3). Because breast milk is important to an infant's development and health, perceived or actual lack of milk supply may prompt a lactating woman to seek out help in the form of pharmaceutical or herbal supplements that increase milk production. These galactagogues are easy to obtain, which provide women with the increased control over their health that many desire (Dog 2009, 54). Popular herbal galactagogues include fenugreek, goat's rue, and milk thistle (Zuppa et al. 2010, 170). Most of the evidence regarding the effectiveness of herbal lactation aids is limited to anecdotal experience, with scant accompaniment of scientific data. It should be noted that most, if not all of the supplements discussed below do have other uses, and may be contraindicated based on other coexisting conditions such as pregnancy. As always, talk to your doctor before beginning any herbal regimen.

HERBS USED AS GALACTAGOGUES

Fenugreek (Trigonella foenum-graecum)

Fenugreek is a well-known herbal galactagogue and the one with the most evidence supporting its effectiveness. The lactogenic properties of fenugreek were first reported in the early 20th century, though fenugreek was in use as a galactagogue before that point (Forinash et al. 2012, 1393). A member of the pea family, fenugreek increases the activity of the body's sweat glands. Because mammary glands are modified sweat glands, it acts to increase milk production in this way (Mortel and Mehta 2013, 159).

Additional uses. Fenugreek may be effective in the treatment of high blood sugar (Haber and Keonavong 2013, 1196). This herb can also be useful in the treatment of bronchitis, sore throats, and irregular periods (Betzold 2004, 152).

Caution. Fenugreek may cause uterine contractions, and so should not be taken in large amounts by pregnant women (Ulbricht et al. 2008, 153). External use may cause irritation, and can cause an infant's urine or sweat to smell like maple syrup. In extreme cases, this can be mistaken for maple syrup disease (Natural Medicines 2014). Additional adverse effects reported include diarrhea and stomach pain (Budzynska et al. 2013, 344). Individuals with peanut or chickpea allergies should avoid this herb (Nice 2011, 131).

Goat's Rue (Galega officinalis)

A member of the bean family, farmers used goat's rue as a lactation aid in Europe because of its observed effects on milk cattle in the late 19th century (Abascal and Yarnell 2008, 291). The results of an Italian observational study indicated a lactogenic effect in the mothers of preterm infants (Castoldi et al. 2014).

Additional uses. Goat's rue may have a positive effect on insulin sensitivity, and is thought to be the forerunner of the popular diabetes drug metformin (Bailey and Day 2004, 115). It is also a diuretic, and can be useful in treating certain gastrointestinal issues.

Caution. No adverse effects to goat's rue have been reported in humans.

Milk Thistle (Silybum marianum)

This relative of the dandelion was traditionally used in Europe to promote lactation. Scientific studies showing the effectiveness of milk thistle as a lactation aid in humans are lacking, though the results of previous animal studies are promising (Mortel and Mehta 2013).

Additional uses. As with fenugreek and goat's rue, milk thistle may be effective in the treatment of diabetes, as well as in protecting the liver from effects of cirrhosis. It may also act as a preventative for certain types of cancer (Foster 2002, 220). Milk thistle may have laxative properties, and preparations from the seeds of the plant are used to treat cases of poisoning by the death cap mushroom (Nice 2011; Zuppa et al. 2010).

Caution. Possible adverse effects include diarrhea, gastrointestinal upset and allergic reactions, primarily in those also allergic to ragweed (Nice, Coghlan, and Birmingham 2011, 10).

Fennel (Foeniculum vulgare)

This is the same fennel that one might buy in a grocery store in the spice aisle, and is effective at promoting lactation in goats (Abascal and Yarnell 2008, 292). A licorice-flavored herb, fennel may work not only to stimulate milk production but also aid in breast milk expression (Badgujar, Patel, and Bandivdekar 2014, 6).

Additional uses. Fennel is used to regulate the length and severity of menstrual cycles, increase libido, and as an aid during childbirth (Penagos Tabares, Bedoya Jaramillo, and Ruiz-Cortés 2014, 13). This herb can also relieve colic in infants (Zapantis, Steinberg, and Schilit 2012, 227). Traditionally, preparations of fennel powder are used to treat snakebites (Natural Medicines 2014).

Caution. Fennel may stimulate menstruation, and should not be used in pregnant women beyond amounts normally found in food (Ernst 2002, 231).

Anise/Aniseed (Pimpinella anisum)

Not to be confused with star anise, anise/aniseed is a licorice-flavored cooking spice, though there is also historical evidence of its lactogenic properties.

Additional uses. Aside from its utility as a popular flavoring, anise is an ingredient in household products such as toothpaste, alcohols and liqueurs, and even perfumes (Facts & Comparisons eAnswers 2005). Anise also has medicinal properties and is used as an expectorant and as treatment for lice and scabies (Natural Medicines 2014). A relative of fennel, anise shares with it the property of regulating menstrual cycles, and a study shows it to be useful in treating indigestion (Ashraffodin Ghosegir et al. 2014, 1121).

Caution. In large quantities, anise may be an abortifacient. Pregnant women should avoid using this herb in quantities beyond those found in food (Facts & Comparisons 2005).

Other/Lesser Used Herbs and Lactogenic Foods

Often, the herbs listed above are mixed together and with other herbs such as blessed thistle, catnip, lavender, and chaste berry to make lactation-inducing drinks. Blessed thistle in particular is thought to be most effective when paired with fenugreek and prepared as a tea. In Ayurveda, nursing mothers ingest the roots of the shatavari, or wild asparagus (Dog 2009, 57). Additional herbs thought to have lactogenic effects include nettle, garlic, caraway, coriander, dandelion, and dill (Nice 2011). Note that caraway, coriander, and dill are in the same family as both fennel and anise, so there may be some bearing on this belief. In addition to the variety of herbs that can help with milk production, “lactation cookies” composed of ingredients such as flaxseed, oatmeal, brewer’s yeast, and a lactogenic herb such as fenugreek are somewhat popular.

CONCLUSION

Even though empirical data related to the effectiveness of the above herbs is lacking, the placebo effect should not be discounted. Aside from a possible increase in milk production,

many of these herbs have a positive therapeutic effect and can be used for a variety of ailments. Lactating women should remember, however, that a galactogogue will only help milk supply if good habits are followed. Regular emptying of the breast, whether by nursing or pumping, provides the best chance of increased milk production. Given the historical evidence associated with the usage of herbs worldwide, researchers should view the subject of the usefulness of herbal galactagogues as a topic ripe for additional research.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

MedlinePlus

<http://nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/>

Health information for the consumer provided by the National Library of Medicine. (free)

Natural Medicines

<http://naturaldatabaseconsumer.therapeuticresearch.com/>

A web site providing accurate data regarding drugs and supplements, interactions between medications, and complementary and alternative therapies. (subscription)

National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health

<https://nccih.nih.gov/>

Resources and information on complementary and alternative health topics from the National Institutes of Health. (free)

Natural Products Foundation

<http://www.naturalproductsinfo.org>

A consumer-focused organization that supports research on herbal therapies, dietary supplements, and related products. (free)

Facts and Comparisons eAnswers

<http://online.factsandcomparisons.com/>

A database providing comprehensive drug information, dosing tools, and calculators for pharmacists. (subscription)

Pubmed Dietary Supplements

<http://ods.od.nih.gov/Research/PubMed_Dietary_Supplement_Subset.aspx>

A search tool allowing consumers to search for literature on dietary supplements. (free)

Lactmed

<http://toxnet.nlm.nih.gov/newtoxnet/lactmed.htm>

A database dealing with drugs and lactation. (free)

Kellymom

<http://www.kellymom.com>

A web site with various resources related to breastfeeding and lactation. (free)

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